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The Director of Central Intelligence
Washington, D.C. 20505

NIC 02790-84
10 May 1984

National Intelligence Council

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

FROM: [redacted] 25X1
National Intelligence Officer for NESA

SUBJECT: Soviet Moves in the Middle East

1. After a period of Soviet quiescence in the Middle East, Moscow may be moving in some new directions to reinforce its interests in the region. This strategy first of all involves Syria and Iraq but also may call for increased radicalism by PDRY and stepped up efforts to improve Soviet relations with Arab moderate states such as Egypt, Jordan and Oman.

-- The Soviets may particularly wish to take advantage of the lack of any new US initiatives in the region due to US elections and our cooling relations with almost all Arab states.

-- It is nonetheless surprising how little effective use the Soviets have made of US failures in the region so far.

2. Syria: After successfully backing the winning horse in the Lebanon conflict, the Soviets must be dismayed at the signs of trouble for Syria as a regional actor. This recent Syrian weakness stems from President Assad's illness and his virtual loss of control over the succession process.

-- Although Syrian leaders will probably not attempt a coup against Assad, they may well go against his wishes in a ruthless struggle for the succession. Such sharp internal turmoil could threaten Assad's regime and possibly even the very Alawite base of power.

-- The Soviets will probably not favor a Syrian confrontation with Israel for the foreseeable future although it might raise the spectre of an Israeli attack in an effort to unite warring Syrian factions against the main enemy.

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3. The Soviets clearly wish to see an end to this domestic Syrian turmoil. They cannot be happy with the prospect of Rifaat emerging triumphant; he is simply too undisciplined, corrupt, flirtatious with Western lifestyles, and roundly hated. Given the importance of the Soviet investment in Syria, it cannot watch the succession struggle impassively. It may be attempting to influence the struggle already but its influence is probably limited and its intervention not appreciated by Assad.

-- Basically almost all of the players involved in the succession struggle are Alawites who will not question the close working relationship with the Soviet Union. Soviet arms are too important to the power of Syria to be dispensed with. Furthermore, a moderate Syria has little role to play in the Middle East when compared to its major role as leader of the anti-Israeli struggle.

-- Soviet interests in Syria would seem to be more threatened by the prospects of internal turmoil rather than by the emergence of any likely leader who might turn against them. Syria will have to remain Moscow's key asset in the Middle East.

4. Iraq: Moscow is continuing its commitment to Iraq in the Gulf war--a conflict which has not worked to Moscow's interests. It is probably dismayed at closer US/Iraqi relations and overall Iraqi moderation on Arab issues. Moscow will seek to increase its influence in Iraq and to restore it to its more traditional radical posture in Middle East politics.

-- The restoration of Syrian/Iraqi relations remains a key goal in Moscow strategy. It vexes the Soviets that its two principal clients in the region are virtually at war, severely diluting the strength of the Arab radicals. Both Moscow and Iraq want Syria to reopen the Iraqi pipeline as the first step to a Syrian/Iraqi rapprochement.

5. A New Syrian/Iraqi Axis?: Despite Moscow's best efforts, there is no real sign that this rapprochement is likely to take place in the very near term. Basically, however, it is an event waiting to happen:

-- Syrian/Iranian relations have never been "natural" and there is a growing friction between them in Lebanon.

-- A weakened or post-Assad Syria might find reason to restore good relations with Iraq in order to return to the Arab fold, please Moscow, gratify Arab states which deplore Syrian support for Iran, and to put Syria more in the mainstream of Arab politics.

-- Syria's price for opening the pipeline (which would replace Iran as Syria's critical source of oil) would be for Iraq to reduce its relations with Egypt, diminish its support for the moderate PLO and to return to a harder line on Israel.

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A recent Syrian/Iranian agreement for further concessionary oil supplies may indicate that both parties will try to overcome differences. If the relationship is broken, Syria will break it. Iran needs Syria far more than Syria needs Iran.

6. Pluses and Minuses for the West: We have long sought to see Syria open the pipeline and break with Iran in order to weaken Iran's position and give some relief to Iraq's financial predicament. Despite the blow that a Syrian break with Iran would be to Iranian ambitions, there is a clear downside. A combined Syrian/Iraqi radical team will make it much harder for the US to gain anything diplomatically in the Middle East.

7. PDRY: We have just received some very disturbing reports that the radicals in the PDRY may have unexpectedly imposed their will on the moderate President Hasani, and may be bringing back the key elements of the old pro-Moscow clique. If this is true--and reports are as yet unconfirmed--Moscow may have decided to end PDRY moderation and to reinstate PDRY's former support for a whole range of liberation movements in the Peninsula and the Gulf.

-- Moscow has always had to balance the benefits of PDRY-supported radical movements throughout the Peninsula (and resulting PDRY isolation) against increased Gulf economic support for an impoverished PDRY which plays a more benign regional role.

-- PDRY recently hosted a conference of Middle East Communist parties and Liberation Fronts in Aden. This suggests a Moscow-supported desire for PDRY to return to greater orthodoxy and the leading role in Gulf Liberation movements--against Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, the UAE and North Yemen.

- PDRY recently hosted a PLO conference designed to unite warring factions, improve relations between Arafat and the Pro-Moscow PFLP/DFLP, and to bring Arafat to heel under more collective leadership.

All of this suggests a possible new radical activism by PDRY.

8. The Arab Moderates: Given the distinct deterioration in US relations with Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt in the last six months, Moscow will begin to press for openings to gain greater foothold with them.

-- Egypt: Moscow is pleased that Egypt will shortly restore the Soviet Ambassador to Cairo. Moscow will probably encourage Egypt to distance itself from the US as its best chance to return to the Arab fold. Although US relations with Egypt will probably not greatly deteriorate, Moscow's relations should improve. Arms sales could be increased.

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-- Jordan: Given King Hussein's current disillusionment with US policies, he will be distinctly open to improved relations with Moscow. Arms deals on several levels are probably in the making. It is worth remembering too that Jordan has one of the highest percentages of students studying in Moscow of any Third World country. The Soviets are banking on the future.

-- Oman: The Soviets continue to make overtures to Oman to establish diplomatic relations. Jordan has helped passed these messages at Moscow's request but reportedly has advised against Oman taking such a step. Although the Gulf states are not likely to open its doors to Moscow, an improvement in relations with Moscow can be one way of expressing greater neutrality and reducing the risk of seeming alliance with the US. Moscow is unhappy with the Gulf war and would probably like to see Iraq assert itself in a struggle for influence in the Gulf down the road.

9. Libya: The Soviets may try to take advantage of Qadhafi's increasingly beleaguered position to gain further military access in Libya.

-- The Soviets will not wish to underwrite Qadhafi's foreign adventures and will probably avoid any kind of binding friendship treaty. The Soviets can nonetheless argue that an increased Soviet presence in Libya can:

  -- help reassure Qadhafi and rein in his wilder impulses.
  -- give them greater influence over Libyan policies.
  -- help work for the day when a more rational and cautious leader might emerge who will nonetheless value the Soviet connection.

10. In short, these will probably be some of the directions Moscow will favor in the year ahead.

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